

ARTICLE 18

Christ's Final Triumph

We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ will return visibly and triumphantly at the end of the present age. The church must always be prepared to meet the Lord, living in expectation of his imminent return.

The Last Days

In these last days, between the first and second coming of Christ, the church carries out its mission in the world. Believers often endure suffering and persecution because of their witness to Christ. In spite of opposition by evil powers, the church is assured of the final victory of Christ's kingdom. These last days come to an end with Christ's return.

Death

Since Christ destroyed the power of death by his resurrection, believers need not be afraid of death, the last enemy. Christ's followers go to be with the Lord when they die. When Christ returns, they will be raised and receive new bodies. Believers who are alive at Christ's coming will be transformed and will also receive new and glorious bodies, fit for life in God's eternal kingdom.

Judgment

When Christ returns, he will destroy all evil powers, including the antichrist. Satan and all those who have rejected Christ will be condemned to eternal punishment in hell, forever separated from the presence of God. Believers must appear before the judgment seat of Christ to have their lives examined and their labours rewarded. By God's grace, they will enter into the joy of God's eternal reign.

The New Creation

All God's children will be united with Christ when he appears, and they will reign with him in glory. Pain, sorrow, and death will be abolished, and the redeemed will be gathered into the new heaven and new earth, where together with the angels they will worship God forever. God will make all things new, and God will be all in all. This is the blessed hope of all believers.

Matthew 24:29-31; 25:13; Mark 13:32-37; Luke 16:9; 23:43; John 14:1-3; Acts 2:17; Romans 8:18-22; 1 Corinthians 3:13-15; 15:26; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Philippians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:1-11; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12; 2:1-12; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:2; 9:26-28; 1 Peter 1:20; 4:7; 1 John 2:18;

3:2-3; Revelation 19:17-21; 20:7-15; 21-22.

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COMMENTARY

The apostle Peter saw the beginning of the last days in the outpouring of the Spirit of the risen Christ on the first Christian Pentecost. Quoting the prophet Joel, he explained, “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (Acts 2:17). The coming of the Spirit marked the completion of Christ’s redemptive work on earth, and so one can say that the first coming of Christ inaugurated the last days. “In these last days,” said the writer to the Hebrews, “he has spoken to us by his Son” (1:2).

The Last Days

John in his first epistle told his readers that they were living in “the last hour” (2:18). Writing to the Corinthians, Paul reminded the church that “the time is short” (1 Corinthians 7:29), and Peter said “the end of all things is near” (1 Peter 4:7). James also underscored that believers in the first century were living in the last days. “Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near” (5:8). And the writer to the Hebrews wanted believers to encourage one another “all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). In the last book of the Bible, we have several references to the brevity of this interim between the first and second coming of Christ (Revelation 1:1; 22:7, 20).

From the first century on, the church has lived in what the New Testament writers call “the last days.” They were inaugurated by Christ’s saving work and the outpouring of the Spirit, and they will end when he returns in glory. During this interim, the church carries out its mission in the world. The church’s witness to Jesus as the only way of salvation often leads to persecution and intense suffering, as Jesus predicted. The seer of Patmos saw the saints coming home to glory “out of the great tribulation” (Revelation 7:14). In spite of suffering, the church triumphs in the end because Christ conquered all evil powers by his death and resurrection.

A question that often puzzles believers is: How could the end of this age be near in New Testament times, when Christ has not yet come after 2,000 years of waiting? To that, we can only say that God views time differently from the way we do. With Him, a thousand years are like a day, and a day is like a thousand years (2 Peter 3:8). Believers always live at the borderline

between this world and the next, and for that reason they are encouraged to be spiritually awake at all times, ready to meet the Lord when he comes.

Death

Although Christ by his resurrection broke the power of death, death is the last enemy to be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26). And so, as the return of Christ at the end of the age is delayed, believers must die. A great many will be alive when the Lord comes (1 Thessalonians 4:15), but a great number have already died during this long time of waiting, working, and watching. Death confronts us not only at the end of life's journey, but we are conscious of death throughout life. And while believers naturally fear the process of dying, they are not "in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:15).

The biblical writers use a variety of figures of speech and euphemisms when they speak of the death of believers. It is seen as the dismantling of a tent (2 Corinthians 5:1), a departure (Philippians 1:23; 2 Timothy 4:6). "Sleep" is a common euphemism for death (1 Thessalonians 4:14; 1 Corinthians 15:51). Dying is compared to undressing (2 Corinthians 5:3, 4), and to the sowing of seed in the ground (1 Corinthians 15:42, 43).

We do not have detailed information on the state of believers who die during this time, between the first and second advent of our Lord. However, we know that death cannot "separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38, 39). Even in death, Christians are said to be "in Christ" (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:18). "Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord," writes Paul (Romans 14:8). The clearest statement on the intermediate state of the dead in Christ is found in Philippians 1:23, where Paul, facing martyrdom, boldly states: "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." If to be with Christ after death is far better than life here on earth, we can say with the apostle John, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on" (Revelation 14:13).

The Last Day

We do not know how long the last days, the end times, will be extended. However, we should not accuse God of delaying the second coming of Christ, for He extends this time of waiting in order to give people an opportunity to repent (2 Peter 3:9). But when God's hour strikes, the last days will come to an end with "the last day."

Jesus spoke repeatedly of "the last day" (John 6:39, 44, 54; 12:48). This last day is also called "the consummation," the wrap-up of this age (Matthew 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20). Sometimes the last day is called simply "the day" (1 Thessalonians 5:5; 1 Corinthians 3:13; Hebrews 10:25), which is really

shorthand for “the day of the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:2). It is known also as “the great day” (Jude 6; Revelation 6:17; 16:14), and “the day of Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:8; 2 Corinthians 1:14; Philippians 1:6; 2:16). It is both “the day of wrath” (Romans 2:5), and “the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30). Also it is called “the end” (Mark 13:7; 1 Corinthians 15:24).

How close we are to the end is not known, although, as Paul said already in the first century, “our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over, the day is almost here” (Romans 13:11, 12). Christians are warned not to try to set dates for the end of the age, the last day. “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). Christ will come as a thief in the night; that is, we cannot predetermine the time of his coming (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10).

In Mennonite history, there have been some sad incidents in which dates were set for the return of Christ. Since such predictions have always proved to be wrong, and since our Lord warned us not to set dates, we should be wary of all attempts to determine the imminence of Christ’s return by observing political, economic, or social developments in our society. Jesus did mention a number of “signs of the times,” but they are the kind of signs that attend the life of the church throughout the present age—persecution, famine, earthquakes, war, and the like. They are not meant to encourage speculation on the time of Christ’s second advent, but rather to make the followers of Christ aware of the kind of world in which they would carry out their mission (Mark 13:5-13).

When Christ returns at the end of the age, all the dead in Christ will rise, and the living saints will be transformed. “We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Corinthians 15:51, 52 NRSV). This is called the first resurrection (Revelation 20: 5, 6), for “the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.”

The bodies which we now have were designed by God for life on this earth, but “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 15:50). And so believers will be given new bodies when Christ returns, which are like “the body of his glory” (Philippians 3:21 NRSV). “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15: 42-44 NRSV).

Millennium

The one passage in the Scriptures that mentions the millennial reign of Christ (Revelation 20:1-10) has been understood in different ways by Mennonite Brethren. Post-millennialism, in which it is thought that before Christ returns, this world will witness a golden age in which Christ is acknowledged as King, is not generally held by Bible readers in our churches.

Some Mennonite Brethren espouse amillennialism. According to this view, Christ's reign was inaugurated at his first coming. Satan is now bound and the spiritually dead are being raised to life and enjoy the blessings of God's kingdom. At the end of the millennium (however long this period might be), Satan is loosed once more and he makes a final onslaught on God and His kingdom. But Satan and his followers are totally defeated and banished forever from the presence of God.

Pre-millennialism is more widely held by Mennonite Brethren. According to this understanding of Revelation 20, the millennium follows the second coming of Christ. However, there is diversity of thought on the nature of the millennium. Also, the thousand years are understood by some not mathematically but as a symbolic number. Because of these different views, and because our understanding of the millennium does not affect our daily life and mission in any significant way, Mennonite Brethren prefer not to include a particular view of the millennium in their Confession of Faith.

Judgment

Judgment is not a palatable subject, but if we want to be faithful to the Scriptures we cannot avoid this "elementary" doctrine (Hebrews 6:1, 2). And whereas God's wrath against human wickedness is revealed from heaven even now in the judgments that strike humankind from time to time (Romans 1:18), there will yet come a "day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Romans 2:5 NRSV). In sermon and parable, Jesus, the kindest person that ever lived on this earth, proclaimed loudly and clearly that a day of judgment was yet to come (Matthew 7:19; 8:12; 25:31-46; John 3:16; 5:29). The apostles too made it very clear that the ungodly "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thessalonians 1:9 NRSV).

The devil, the archenemy of humankind, and all his hangers-on will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone (Revelation 20:10), "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). The same fate awaits the antichrist, who emerges at the end of the age, and whom Christ will destroy with the breath of his mouth (2 Thessalonians 2:8). Those who have rejected the gospel will suffer eternal punishment (2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 4:17) as will all apostates (Hebrews 10: 26, 27). "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but

must endure God's wrath" (John 3:36 NRSV).

The punishment of the wicked is described in various ways. They are said to go to hell (Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; Mark 9:43, 45, 47). Hell is also called "the lake of fire" (Revelation 19:20; 20:14, 15). Jesus spoke of "the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22). It is also a place of darkness "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). It is called "the second death" (Revelation 20:6), punishment and destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 Corinthians 1:18). By contrast, believers are rescued "from the coming wrath" (1 Thessalonians 1:10 NRSV).

The Eternal Reign of God

Those who put their trust in Christ and his redeeming grace have the hope of eternal life. Jesus promised his disciples that he was preparing a place for them and that he would someday come and take them to himself (John 14:2-6). He calls this glorious place "my Father's house" (John 14:2) in which there are many rooms—room enough for all the saints of all the ages. When Christ comes in clouds of glory, he will take those who belong to him home to glory, "and so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The Father's house is "a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" (2 Corinthians 5:1). Jesus also spoke of the "eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9).

This heavenly home of the saints is also known as paradise (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:4). "To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7 NRSV). In one of his parables, Jesus uses a very Jewish figure of speech for heaven, calling it "Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22 KJV). People will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, says Jesus (Matthew 8:11, 12). In Revelation 19, John describes the bliss of the redeemed in terms of a great wedding feast in which the Lamb and his bride celebrate their eternal union. One of the pictures of heaven that is expanded in some detail is that of the holy city, the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21, 22). This is "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10). Throughout the ages, the saints have looked forward to "the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14), the heavenly Mount Zion (Revelation 14:1).

In this age, we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7); we see by means of "a mirror dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12 NRSV), but when the last day comes, we shall see Christ face to face. "We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). To see God is to see His glory. Jesus prayed that his followers might see the glory which he had before the foundation of the world (John 17:24). The sufferings of

this life “are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

When we appear before Christ at the end of the age (2 Corinthians 5:10), he will reward us for all that we did in his name. Each person will receive his or her rewards according to their labours (1 Corinthians 3:8). God will not overlook our work and our love for others (Hebrews 6:10). When believers enter the gates of glory “they will rest from their labour” but “their deeds will follow them” (Revelation 14:13).

To be with Christ in glory means to experience joy at its deepest level. God will wipe away all tears (Revelation 7:17): “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4 NRSV). All of God’s children look forward to the day when they will “enter into the joy” of the Lord (Matthew 25:21, 23 NRSV). And while we wait for that day, we have the assurance that God “is able to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy” (Jude 24).

ARTICLE 18

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

The article on “Christ’s Final Triumph” raises practical pastoral issues in two basic areas: the first involving death and the afterlife and the second involving eschatology and the “last days.” The Bible calls Christians to live their lives with the end in view. With such a perspective, the Master is given free rein to align our life priorities and nurture us to maturity. Such a life will receive, without reservation, the acclaim of heaven as the words “well done” are sounded.

The teaching of this article is a comfort to the believer and a warning to the non-believer. It speaks words of assurance to all believers, especially those struggling, weary, or grieving death. It is a call of repentance and faith to the careless and indifferent.

Watchfulness is a distinguishing characteristic of the Christian living with the end in view. This watchfulness pertains not only to the timing, but to the resultant lifestyle as well. Only unprepared Christians live as though they will almost certainly have upwards of 70 years before their work is presented before the Judge. The completion date may be hastened dramatically on two fronts: by death or Christ’s second coming.

Perspectives on Death

The common denominator of life is death. People are confronted with this reality as they witness the death of someone else or face the prospect personally. These experiences provide an excellent opportunity for ministry and pastoral care.

Christians are prepared to face death at any time. They live confidently in the knowledge that death is a summons home to the place where their real citizenship resides. They feel their mortality, but it’s not an altogether unsettling thought. Though keenly aware of life’s uncertainty, they are not morbidly preoccupied with death and dying.

When faced with imminent death because of disease or old age, it’s normal to face the prospect with anxiety. The passage from life to death is a trip with few road maps, except that of our Lord Jesus. Certainly, some apprehension is to be expected.

To prepare for the passage, rehearsal of the promises of Scripture concerning God’s children can be particularly helpful to bring assurance. It is the strength of the relationship with God more than the extravagant

beauty of heaven that is likely to encourage the believer.

End-time judgment for believers should not be dreaded, but seen as report card day. Graduation is not in question, but different awards will be received on the basis of faithfulness. If one's name is in the "Book of Life," there is no reason to fear. In Jesus Christ, the believer stands firm.

Medical science has sometimes made decisions regarding extension of life difficult. While Christians enjoy life, they have less need to prolong it by extraordinary means. They know that life on earth is not the final reality. However, neither assisted suicide nor active euthanasia should be pursued since it is God's exclusive right to give and take life. (See Article 14: The Sanctity of Human Life.)

The Christian Funeral

A Christian funeral is permeated with an undertone of hope. That is not to say that grief should be suppressed. Death still brings distress and sadness as with any prolonged separation from a loved one. Full victory will be gained when the cycle of life and death is broken, when life alone will prevail for eternity. Grieving is a reality, but so is hope.

The funeral or memorial service is an act of worship. Planning for the service gives an opportunity for healthy remembering of the life and for grieving the loss of the deceased. The goals of the service are to honour the life of the loved one, as well as to encourage the family, friends, and community to continue living with meaning, hope, and purpose. The funeral meditation is an opportunity to reflect on the purpose of life with reference to God as Creator, Christ as Redeemer, and the Spirit as Comforter. Finding a central metaphor suggested by the life of the person being memorialized can give focus to the meditation and encouragement to the grieving family. If a family does not confess faith in Christ, they may be open to brief but challenging words of comfort and hope based on the message of God's grace in Christ. The pastor must take care not to violate trust by using someone's sorrow as a pulpit for hard-edged judgment or opportunistic evangelism. At the same time, the pastor must not project a notion of "cheap grace." Many have found that clearly articulating the message of God's grace opens the way for evangelistic opportunities in later conversations with grieving family and friends.

Different areas may have different funeral customs. It is important for a pastor to be aware of cultural and regional sensitivities. Some prefer to practice a more intimate burial service followed by a public memorial service. Others insist on an open casket at the funeral followed by burial. (For help in planning the funeral, see the Kindred Productions publication *Following the Call*, 138-40.)

Some may have questions about cremation versus burial. Both the Old and

New Testaments assume burial as a customary means of laying the body to rest. However, there is no theological issue which would prevent choosing cremation. Sometimes, however, fire is associated with judgment and family sensitivities become the more crucial consideration.

Priorities in Light of the Second Coming

For the watchful Christian, the second advent is a blessed hope. No matter what joys are experienced on earth, they will certainly be eclipsed by the joy of meeting our loving Lord and Saviour in the air. Therefore, the watchful and prepared Christian “packs light.” We hold lightly to material possessions because we realize that the world and everything in it will wear out and disappear. We exchange the temporal things of this world for eternal gain, thus planting our hearts firmly on heaven’s soil. We realize that the Judge will consider how wealth and time were used for God’s kingdom, and that hoarding and indulgence will be viewed negatively.

One should be aware that in times of prosperity and wealth, interest in prophecy and Christ’s return tends to be diminished. Where hardship and persecution or their prospect become the norm, the longing for Jesus’ coming usually intensifies. Those living in times of greater ease and prosperity are more likely to be caught off guard at Christ’s appearing.

Just as death can be unexpected, the watchful believer understands that Christ’s coming will surprise many. No one knows or can know when God will give the final signal. From time to time, especially during times of millennial fervour, self-proclaimed prophets set dates as specific as a certain day or as general as a certain year. No attention should be paid to such speculations regardless of the means employed to predict the time of Jesus’ return. Such predictions are not only presumptuous, but thoroughly unbiblical. Only the Father knows the time.

However, we do well to study the nature of the events which will signal the coming of the end. Biblical prophecy should be studied in balance with the rest of Scripture. Ignorance of it may result in lack of readiness. Making it the prime focus over an extended time often leads to excesses, skewed perspectives, and even division. It can result in a people who are “so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good.”

Watchful believers are aware that the battle for the minds and souls of people will intensify. Deceptive signs and wonders will be the catalyst for some to turn away (Matthew 24:24). Alert Christians will avoid being mesmerized by flash and sizzle, but will rather seek after the will of God for their lives. The message God has given us in His Son is more than sufficient to live a Spirit-filled life.

If we are watchful and living in right relationship with God and others,

our priorities will not need dramatic last-minute realignment. Prepared lives are characterized by alertness and self-discipline. These attitudes find their expression in lives of prayer, purity, and sacrificial service (Matthew 25:31-46).

A Perspective of Peace

Another characteristic of a believer who has an end-time perspective is peace. Christ's triumphal return at the end of this age is a quiet assurance in a world of political turmoil and economic uncertainty. The fast pace of changing world events, wars and bombs, genetic manipulation, crime, or large-scale atrocities may lead one to conclude that the world is out of control. To know that God hasn't abandoned this world to fate or to the whims of humans but to a triumphant, climactic victory over the destructive forces of evil is a source of great comfort. As Christians, we are assured through our faith that God's plan remains secure. God tolerates human disobedience for the time being, but overall control is never in question. Every pastor has occasions in public teaching or private counselling to reassure believers that the final reign of God is sure.

A similar sense of calm prevails when faced with questions of personal injustice. Revenge and retaliation are not ours to carry out. These are God's domain. We know that God sees every abuse that occurs and will bring about a greater justice than we could ever accomplish. With this knowledge, we find it possible to forgive, releasing individuals to God's care.

This does not mean that we take a passive stance toward all matters of injustice. Where people are oppressed, we seek to intervene on their behalf. We do not believe we can create the millennial kingdom through human effort, but we work for justice because we belong to such a kingdom.

With the end in view, we also face hardship of various kinds with considerable perseverance and hope. We know that suffering is a given for this world only and that in the next there will be no tears. Our pain is a tool which God may use to shape us into the masterpiece He desires.

Our society is focused on success. Every person is encouraged to set goals and plans for the future. These plans may include economic freedom or personal fulfillment. Often the greatest void in these pursuits is spiritual commitment. In this climate, the hope of heaven and the assurance of heavenly rewards can be an incentive for focused living. "Therefore encourage each other with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).